

ARUN JAITLEY'S TRIBUTE

He was a democrat with a liberal political bent

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NEW DELHI: Atal Bihari Vajpayee built a party that became a strong alternative to the Congress and, along with other Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders, strengthened Indian democracy, Union minister Arun Jaitley wrote in a blog Friday.

Determination was an essential part of the late prime minister's political journey and both Pokhran and Kargil were high points of that journey, he added.

Vajpayee was prime minister when India carried out nuclear tests in Pokhran in 1998, for the first time in almost a quarter of a century. The following year, India and Pakistan were involved in a conflict in the Kargil heights of Kashmir, after which Indian armed forces recaptured most of the positions taken by Pakistani troops and infiltrators.

"The Nuclear Test in 1998 was

a defining moment of his Government," Jaitley wrote. "He went out of the way to work for peace with Pakistan. But when the need arose, he inflicted a severe blow to it in Kargil. Both Pokhran and Kargil were his high points."

Jaitley, who worked closely with Vajpayee in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), described the former prime minister as a "democrat" with a liberal political bent. "He accepted criticism," Jaitley wrote, adding that Vajpayee valued consensus and bore no malice. "He communicated even with those who disagreed (with him)."

These qualities added to Vajpayee's charisma and his credibility was his greatest asset, Jaitley wrote.

The minister credited Vajpayee with creating, in an era dominated by the Nehruvian

Congress, a political party that was an ideological alternative to the Congress, disagreed on various issues with the Congress, took the Congress head-on, struggled for almost five decades and in the last two decades not only became an alternative to the Congress but overtook it. "Atalji ran a marathon," Jaitley said. "He was a patient runner."

But for Vajpayee, LK Advani and others, Jaitley said, Indian democracy would have looked different – dominated by one party, one family with a lot of scattered smaller parties. "That did not happen. Atalji and his colleagues made the difference."

Vajpayee was a wordsmith, Jaitley said, and could use his felicity of language to get out of any challenging situation.

"His oration was always blended with humour. His ability for an instant response was unmatched. His choice of words, his turn of phrase, the poetry that

he injected in his expression, gave him the ability to even explain the most complicated issue in a simple language," Jaitley wrote.

Vajpayee had the ability to rise above partisan interests which he displayed by strongly standing behind the Congress government during the 1971 war with Pakistan, he wrote.

The minister recalled Vajpayee's contribution to shaping the Jana Sangh and its later avatar, the BJP, and added that despite the initial isolation and a poor show in 1984, when the BJP could win just two Lok Sabha seats, he along with Advani and others brought the party to the centre stage of Indian politics by winning 183 seats in 1998.

"Along with Advaniji, he created second-line leaders both in the Centre and the States," Jaitley wrote, and recalled that Vajpayee was always open to ideas, gave priority to national inter-

ests, and was at ease in dealing with both friends and opponents and never allowed himself to get into any petty controversy. "He had no personal enemies since he spoke mostly on issues rather than individuals."

Jaitley called Vajpayee a "liberalizer" on the economic front. National highways, rural roads, better infrastructure, a new and pragmatic telecom policy, and a new electricity law were evidence of this, he wrote. "In any intra-Governmental debate, his nod inevitably was for the liberal economic view. He corrected the foreign policy imbalance in the changed global environment."

Vajpayee's cabinet meetings lasted for hours, and ministers in his government still occasionally speak about the quality of snacks served in those meetings, Jaitley wrote. "He even loved to experiment (with) foods when he travelled internationally," he added.